

Several months ago I had several students write their thoughts to the FCC about what they thought about localism in today's media (see other postings from Muncie, Indiana) and yet I did not forward my thoughts at the same time. Therefore, here are my brief comments which will largely focus on the radio business because that is what I am most familiar with as General Manager of the local NPR affiliate.

I must admit that I face a conundrum. I am not fond of the idea that the FCC should regulate localism with more government intervention and yet I can see there could be some public good as a result. For example, I am not fond of the EOC regulations that I must comply with, but I understand what the FCC is attempting to do. I'll suggest what the FCC might do to protect localism after reviewing why I feel this is a very important issue.

The bottom line has surpassed the public service mission: Localism is disappearing because it costs to be local. For the most successful stations, localism breeds success to the bottom line, but since in every community not every station can be number one, it becomes more cost effective to cede the localism to the number one station while reducing staff to cut corners—even if you already own the number one station, it is too expensive to maintain the same levels of localism with your other regional stations. This is why large media corporations can maintain such high bottom lines because they cut out their largest expenses...people. It is those people who would otherwise have been able to help provide localism. These large corporations still have staff that can be on-site at a car dealership by tying in localism with ad sales, but they no longer have people with either the local music scene connections or the news connections thanks to satellite automation which I see as the two biggest issues.

The music scene:

With few staff, there is not the ability to be connected to the "pulse" of the local community. There are no longer programs that specifically feature local bands working to develop a following. If you want success in radio today, your band has to begin with a national ad campaign rather than work your way up the ranks—that is rare and leaves out a lot of good music. It also leaves the local music scene wanting...

A station that relies on presenting music from the national scene is in jeopardy of being marginalized because virtually commercial free music is either available now through the internet through streaming or music downloads or through satellite radio even if it costs a service fee each month. Over the air television lost that battle when challenged by cable TV and the volume choices that cable TV brought since now over 70% of the US market gets its "over-the-air-TV" via cable. Until the paradigm changes, commercial radio will continue to lose audience to its competitors like satellite radio who bring 160 channels (and that means that non-commercial radio is not too far behind).

The news scene:

The Pew Charitable Trusts have funded a research project into the changing news media (<http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org>). The

research says that TV news has lost 30% of its reporters in the last few years but the same news load is now being carried by the remaining reporters. This reduces the time any reporter would have for investigative reporting and focuses instead on increased use of Video News Releases with no time for fact checking. The research also says that there has been a 50% reduction in radio news reporters in the last five years (this did not include most National Public Radio stations though my small market station has been forced to reduce its local news staff by one due to budget cuts—I'd love to do more public service news and news/talk programming except that I can't afford it). Fewer stations staffing reporters also means a significantly reduced influx of stories into news co-ops like Associated Press and Reuters which redistribute the "Rip'N'Read" stories.

This weekend tornados passed through the Muncie, Indiana area. Our station was the only radio station to provide live coverage of the alerts from the National Weather Service. The other stations in the area did not devote any staff to the crisis at all relying instead on an automated weather voice that kept talking about the current temperature and forecast for "potential severe weather" that evening while there were tornado warnings all around!! (Without diverting from my message too far, I will say that the Emergency Alert System still doesn't work well for these situations, so manual operation is still the only option if one is to be accurate.)

On the positive side, Indiana Public Radio earns more awards from the Associated Press, Society of Professional Journalists, and Radio & Television News Directors Association than any other station in the state commercial or non-commercial (25 total with 15 first place finishes), yet on the other hand, this is so easy, I begin to wonder with only one full-time reporter what sort of competition are we currently really facing...

The solution depends on how strong you would like the "fourth branch" of government—the news media—to actually be. Somehow if stations are not going to be required to maintain strong news operations or give any attention to local music themselves that these same stations be required to pitch in funding to maintain strong local news and music programs with other stations so there are appropriate outlets somewhere like cable companies are legislated to help financially support C-SPAN. Public service needs to be a mandated priority on a few stations in each market to be determined by each local group of stations.

Democracy is a messy business and we've done too good a job of sanitizing our democracy in the current media. The so called talk programs I hear tend to over-hype, over-lean one direction or another, and under-deliver the facts and root issues involved. The FCC has the ability to hold stations accountable for their lack of local service; I hope it chooses to use that ability. Thank you.